

From Pandemic to Progress

Eight Education Pathways for COVID-19 Recovery

FEBRUARY 2021

Allison Crean Davis

Creating an Institute for Education Improvement

The education sector has been facing a reckoning for some time: Students in the United States consistently underperform on international assessments, and results between demographic groups are persistently and unacceptably uneven. If ever there were a case for continuous improvement, this is it. The continuous improvement (CI) process is elegantly simple: It's an iterative cycle of planning, implementing, reflecting, and rethinking ("Plan, Do, Study, Act").

But if CI is so simple, why isn't the American education system embracing and implementing it at scale? Perhaps because "simple" is not the same as "easy." Continuous improvement — done broadly, consistently, and sustainably — requires leadership and systemic support.

As a center of gravity for continuous improvement, an Institute for Education Improvement (IEI) — modeled after healthcare's Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) — could facilitate collaboration between researchers and practitioners, drive improvement efforts around vexing (but solvable) educational challenges, and ground its work in the science of improvement. With the support of IEI, education could emulate the dramatic improvements to longstanding challenges seen in other sectors.

In the wake of COVID-19, the education sector should launch an Institute for Education Improvement (IEI) to coordinate a field-focused continuous improvement learning agenda.

From Pandemic to Progress puts forth eight ambitious but achievable pathways that leaders and policymakers can follow to rebuild education — and student learning and well-being — as the country begins to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. To read more from this series, visit www.bellwethereducation.org/pandemictoprogress.

The concept of continuous improvement is not new.

The underlying principles of continuous improvement have been branded and marketed in a variety of ways over the years – Statistical Quality Control, “Lean” Manufacturing, Total Quality Management, Six Sigma. These and other forms of continuous improvement helped resurrect the Japanese economy after World War II, revived the U.S. auto industry in the 1980s, and, most recently, helped save lives as healthcare settings across the country have adopted its practices.

Specifically, American industry found itself falling behind in the increasingly global marketplace of the 1980s. Its embrace of continuous improvement generated dramatic results:

- Motorola moved from the brink of bankruptcy to worldwide market dominance and, in 1988, won the first-ever National Quality Award from the U.S. Department of Commerce.
- Ford Motor Company moved from losses of \$3.6 billion in 36 months between 1980 and 1982 to the highest automobile company profits ever seen in this country.
- Bridgestone Tire Company went from near shambles to the fastest growth rate in its industry.

Nearly a decade later, healthcare arrived at its own turning point, spurred by decades of rising costs, inconsistent patient outcomes, and increased external accountability from managed care systems. Healthcare leaders sought to translate the promise of continuous improvement to the healthcare context and created a hub, IHI, that could focus collaborative efforts and drive large-scale change. IHI paired experts in continuous improvement from industry with healthcare researchers and practitioners.

Now a self-sustaining organization with \$54 million in annual revenue, IHI has:

- Spurred over 50 collaborative [“Breakthrough Series”](#) projects focused on solving several dozen healthcare challenges. By engaging over 2,000 clinical teams from 1,000 healthcare organizations, this effort has lowered C-section rates, reduced intensive care unit (ICU) costs by 25%, and halved hospitalizations for patients with congestive heart failure.
- Sponsored the [100,000 Lives Campaign](#), which helped build a national infrastructure for collective change on common problems of practice (e.g., preventing central line and surgical site infections), resulting in 122,000 fewer needless deaths.
- Scaled worldwide framing of its work as [“Triple Aim”](#) – simultaneously focusing on population health, the individual healthcare experience, and reducing the per-capita cost of care.

IHI also consistently ensures researchers and practitioners work hand in hand, manages knowledge on priorities for improvement and related outcomes, shares tools and resources, and actively raises the profile of CI and its value for the sector. Importantly, IHI’s diverse financial inputs and resources have enabled sustainability and mitigated the uncertainty of relying on purely foundation resources or grant-funded work. Finally, IHI also evaluates its initiatives, providing valuable proof points of the impact of CI on critical indicators of success.

Continuous improvement needs a “center of gravity” in U.S. education.

The world’s highest-performing countries in education integrate CI into their approaches to instruction and ongoing professional development. But in the United States, its deployment has been slow, spotty, and challenging to sustain.

Of note, the [Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching](#) has integrated improvement science with networked improvement communities (NICs), [Strive Together](#) has conducted evidence-based work around a “cradle to career” framework of developmental milestones for collective impact, and the [Regional Education Laboratory system](#) (RELS) has provided capacity-building tools related to CI (e.g., [Toolkit for CI in Education](#), [Continuous Improvement Through Networked Improvement Communities facilitator guide](#), and REL West’s [Introduction to Improvement Science](#)). While promising and admirable, none of these alone fulfills the critical “center of gravity” role that IHI does for healthcare.

If the U.S. education sector is to dramatically improve outcomes for students, it needs large-scale, consistent, and sustained organizational support for continuous improvement. An Institute for Education Improvement (IEI) could serve this purpose. As a neutral and sustainable entity, an IEI could support researchers and practitioners in addressing critical yet solvable problems of practice.

First, an IEI could help ensure that CI processes are applied inclusively and equitably. The IEI could recruit and support educational researchers and practitioners with a range of backgrounds and experiences to design the work. A diverse group of researchers and practitioners will help ensure the right problems are identified; the most appropriate strategies are selected for varying conditions (e.g., urban, rural, suburban, and tribal settings); the right metrics are used for feedback (e.g., valid, reliable, and relevant); and accurate insights are drawn from incoming data (e.g., objectively accurate and culturally specific.) The IEI could advance CI implementation to help the sector understand what kinds of support educators most benefit from as they learn the approach and how those needs vary according to school, student, and educator characteristics. And the IEI could ensure improved outcomes are equitable for students, even as strategic approaches may need to vary to achieve them.

Second, an IEI could convene and build the capacity of researchers and practitioners to participate in the CI process. This could include training on a range of approaches to continuous improvement that retain integrity to its basic tenets, as well as opportunities to share best practices and lessons learned from those who have implemented CI in the past.

Third, an IEI could help make the case for CI, raise its profile in the sector, and help generate collective action. This could include providing resources for evaluating the impact of continuous improvement and disseminating critical proof points of how its application advances evidence-based practices and student outcomes. It could also include evidence of CI’s financial and academic return on investment compared to other interventions. Over time, the IEI could demonstrate the influence of continuous improvement methods on the pace and trajectory of positive change.

This combination of capacity building, convening, and collective action would demonstrate how the application of scientific inquiry can not only help improve student outcomes overall but also reduce the variation in those outcomes — especially the outcomes of high-need and underserved students.

A Playbook for Launching IEI

The healthcare analog suggests a basic theory of action for launching IEI.

- 1 **Recognize the need and find a champion to amplify it.** Education sector leaders, including researchers and practitioners, must join forces and resources to raise awareness that the application of continuous improvement, as applied in industry, healthcare, and education in other countries, is critical to large-scale and equitable improvement in this country.
- 2 **Launch a national demonstration ...**
 - ... that is amply funded ... The philanthropic sector should provide support for IEI to launch with a national demonstration project focused on learning about and applying continuous improvement practices, including free consulting, materials, and access to training courses and reviews. Funding could come from one or a combination of education-oriented funders. It might also come from IES as a companion to its array of existing centers (National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, National Center for Education Research, National Center for Education Statistics, and National Center for Special Education Research).
 - ... and provides a “proof of concept.” Human beings enact CI, so in addition to outcome metrics, their commitment to it matters. IEI must not only provide capacity building and support for partnering and convening, it must also evaluate its efforts in terms of implementation and outcomes. And it must disseminate evidence of its effectiveness to build buy-in among stakeholders.
- 3 **Use success as a launching pad for a sustained effort.** IEI must begin with a strategic plan that includes deliberate efforts toward sustainability that go beyond grant funding. This may include a membership model, in which researchers and practitioners would purchase access to different kinds of programming that supplement general support.
- 4 **Allow time.** IHI has been at work for decades, and there is still work to do to scale and sustain its efforts. In the spirit of continuous improvement itself, the work is never “done.” IEI will need time to stand up, roll out, and incrementally show impact.

CI is not an initiative, it is a process.

Education has a long history of jumping from one initiative to another. But CI can offer both dramatic as well as incremental changes. Indeed, an accumulation of incremental changes contribute, ultimately, to dramatic shifts at scale. Establishing an IEI has significant potential to drive improvements in student outcomes, but it will require an unwavering commitment to the CI process and time to bear fruit over the long haul.

To read more from this series, visit www.bellwethereducation.org/pandemictoprogress.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the Walton Family Foundation for their financial support of this project, to Super Copy Editors, and to Five Line Creative for graphic design. Any errors in fact or analysis are the responsibility of the author alone.

About the Author

Allison Crean Davis

Allison Crean Davis is a senior adviser at Bellwether Education Partners. She can be reached at allison.creandavis@bellwethereducation.org.

About Bellwether Education Partners

Bellwether Education Partners is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice. Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life.